Subjective Meanings of Loneliness: Narratives of Young and Middle-Aged Adults[1]

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Subjective Meanings of Loneliness: Narratives of Young and Middle-Aged Adults. In research on loneliness, the cognitive and interactionist definitions have dominated the field. Even though conceptualisations were broadened with rediscovered existential loneliness, alternative approaches to loneliness have been rarely applied. Leaving out such equally relevant approaches may not do justice to the complex nature of loneliness, leading to a biased or incomplete understanding. This paper explores potential alternative approaches to loneliness by investigating the subjective meanings and experiences of 45 young and middle-aged adults. Based on their narratives about loneliness, we evaluated the extent to which their perspectives fit various theoretical approaches found in the literature. The personal stories of the study respondents allowed extracting four meanings of loneliness that are united by one common factor, i.e., a general lack of connection. This concerns not only connections with family, friends, or the local community but a general lack of connection with the society and prevailing systems that provide the life's purpose. Our analyses suggest that the individual narratives of people's experience of loneliness do not squeeze into the usually distinguished emotional and social loneliness concepts. To advance the field of loneliness research and increase the awareness of alternative approaches to loneliness, we suggest a more general definition of loneliness with the central focus on the lack of connection.
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Introduction

The dominant approach in socio-psychological research on loneliness is the cognitive approach to loneliness, which was defined by Perlman and Peplau as a negative experience that occurs when there is a discrepancy between desired and actual levels of social contact (Perlman – Peplau 1982). Its subjective and cognitive aspects are highlighted: the feeling of loneliness depends on expectations for support shaped by the cultural environment (Charpentier – Kirouac

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2022; Lykes – Kemmelmeier 2014; Perlman – Peplau 1982). The definition is often complemented by the division between social and emotional loneliness proposed by interactionists: emotional loneliness refers to the absence of a close, intimate attachment, and social loneliness refers to the absence of friendships or the sense of a community (Weiss 1973) (De Jong Gierveld et al. 2018; Ojembe et al. 2022; Swader – Moraru 2023). Recently, there is a revived attention to existential loneliness, which is defined as inescapable separateness from others (Cherry – Smith 1993; Moustakas 1961) and is related to the lack of meaning in life (Van Tilburg 2021). However, in an important early effort on theories of loneliness, Perlman and Peplau (1982) defined eight theoretical approaches potentially relevant to its understanding, but there was little attention to other approaches to loneliness. The focus on a limited number of approaches to loneliness may have created an incomplete discourse and may not cover what people actually undergo when experiencing the feeling.

Alternative approaches to loneliness, as described by Perlman and Peplau, are a phenomenological approach, defining loneliness as a discrepancy between the inner self and its manifestations through social roles (Rogers 1961); the sociological approach, treating loneliness as a normative product of social forces (Riesman et al. 1961; Slater 1976; for the review of theoretical approaches to loneliness provided by Perlman and Peplau (1982), see Table 1). Rogers' phenomenological perspective (Rogers 1961) assumed that society presses the individual to act in socially approved ways, which neglects the inner self, and the fear of rejection leads to an empty existence. The sociological approach (Riesman et al. 1961; Slater 1976) emphasized the declining primary group relations, increase of family mobility and social mobility as driving forces for increased loneliness. The privacy approach (Derlega – Margulis 1982) highlighted the absence of an appropriate social partner and interpersonal relationships that lack the privacy needed for honest communication as reason for loneliness. The psychodynamic models (Fromm-Reichmann 1959; Sullivan 1953; Zilboorg 1938) attribute loneliness to early influences of childhood, with a focus on factors within the individual (like traits, intrapsychic conflicts). In the general systems theory (Flanders 1982), loneliness is seen as a feedback mechanism for helping the individual or society to maintain a steady, optimal level of human contact.

Table 1: **Eight theoretical approaches to loneliness by Perlman – Peplau (1982)**

Theoretical approach	Concept of loneliness	Authors
Cognitive	The perceived discrepancy between desired and actual levels of social contact	Perlman – Peplau 1982
Interactionist	Emotional loneliness refers to the absence of a close, intimate attachment, and social loneliness refers to the absence of friendships or the sense of a community	Weiss 1973
Existential	Humans as separate persons are ultimately alone	Moustakas 1961
Phenomenological	The discrepancy between the inner self and its manifestations through social roles	Rogers 1961
Sociological	Normative — a statistically common attribute of the population	Riesman et al. 1961; Slater 1976
Privacy	Arising from interpersonal relationships lacking the privacy needed for honest communication	Derlega – Margulis 1982
Psychodynamic	Overwhelming persistent experience reflecting traits of narcissism, megalomania and hostility	Zilboorg 1938; Sullivan 1953; Fromm-Reichmann 1959
Systems	Feedback mechanism for helping the individual or society maintain an optimal level of human contact	Flanders 1982

Since Perlman and Peplau's overview, new approaches to loneliness have been developed. More recent literature reviews merge the earlier presented psychodynamic and interactionist perspectives into the social needs approach, stating that loneliness is caused by the absence (a set) of relationships needed to meet inherent social needs, such as attachment, social integration, reassurance of worth, etc. (Heinrich – Gullone 2006; Motta 2021). Building on the psychodynamic and interactionist perspectives Stein and Tuval-Mashiach (2015) added existential loneliness of a consciousness isolated from all other consciousness and longing for epistemic unison with others, as discussed by Mijuskovic (2012), Tillich (1980), and Moustakas (1961). They also added affective aspects to the phenomenological approach, such as pain, the sense of emptiness, anxiety, depression, boredom and sadness, to differentiate between various types of loneliness (Mikulincer – Segal 1990). Heinrich and Gullone (2006) offered a different description of the interactionist approach based on Weiss (1982): loneliness arises from the interplay of personal, cultural and situational factors. According to this view, personal features (shyness, intro-

version, social anxiety and poor social skills) interact with cultural and situational factors (such as relocation, rejection, exclusion, poverty, low income, and unemployment) to hinder social relationships. There is also a proposal to differentiate between family emotional loneliness and romantic emotional loneliness (DiTommaso – Spinner 1997) and introduce collective loneliness emerging in active social networks of similar individuals (Cacioppo et al. 2015). From the evolutionary perspective, loneliness equals perceived social isolation accompanied by social pain, which motivates to maintain connections with others needed for health and survival (Baumeister – Leary 1995; Cacioppo et al. 2011).

The variety of definitions indicates that the jury is still out on which approach to loneliness captures its essence best, and each can be criticised for various reasons. The cognitive approach has been criticised for being too broad (Rook 1984; Wood 1986): dissatisfaction with social contacts might not be limited to loneliness, or an individual might be dissatisfied with one aspect of relationships (the number of friends) but not with the other (the level of intimacy), thus not feel lonely. Also, the focus here is not on how or what kind of loneliness is experienced but rather on how loneliness is perceived (Larose et al. 2002). Linda Wood (1986) criticised the social needs approach and the affective part of the phenomenological approach as concerning sources of loneliness rather than its essence. She proposed that "loneliness is the individual experience of *failed* intersubjectivity" (1986:188, italics in the original). Difficulties in conceptualising loneliness lie in the phenomenon's complexity: "it is a feeling as well as a meaning" (Mijuskovic 2012). According to Motta (2021), it includes a cluster of attitudes, cognitions and behaviours; thus, an excessive focus on social relations does not allow for the investigation of the particularities of the experience.

Some researchers (Sønderby – Wagoner 2013) criticised the tradition of quantifying the phenomenon that is complex and subjective. It shifts the focus from the experience of loneliness to its degree or kind (Rokach 2004; Wood 1989). Sønderby and Wagoner (2013) suggested that the main theoretical approaches have been narrowed down to theories that could be supported by data (Jones 1989; Weiss 1989). The developed and widely used scales measuring loneliness (UCLA, De Jong Gierveld Loneliness Scale) have led to a unidimensional research area. In other words, the essence of critique is the premise that the quantification of loneliness tends to reduce its complexity.

The experiences of loneliness examined by qualitative methods build a smaller research body (Charpentier – Kirouac 2022; McInnis – White 2001; Pettigrew – Roberts 2008; Sand – Strang 2006; Sullivan et al. 2016). A phenomenological study performed by Dahlberg (2007) aimed to capture the essence of loneliness without reducing its complexity. The article reveals that

involuntary loneliness lacks both context and connection, leaving an individual feeling detached from the world, as though they do not fit in. Loneliness extends beyond the current situation and can be experienced even in the company of many people or, conversely, in complete solitude. However, empirical analysis reveals that a sense of belonging can dispel loneliness, even when connecting with someone who may be physically distant.

A closely related discussion is held on the suitability of loneliness measurements, i.e., how well they measure the phenomenon (or instrument's validity), asking whether it is better to avoid mentioning "loneliness" in survey questions due to its stigma or it is not necessary (De Jong Gierveld – Van Tilburg 2010; Victor et al. 2005). This inspired the question: what do people mean when they answer such single questions as: "*How much time during the past week did you feel lonely?*". Therefore, we decided to step back from dominant definitions and theoretical approaches, and following the principles of grounded theory, to formulate the research questions for a qualitative study: What do people mean when asked about loneliness? What are subjective meanings of the phenomenon? Consequently, we aimed to ascertain whether the prevailing academic approaches fit with the way lay people narrate loneliness?

Methods

Recruitment
A diverse sample of participants was recruited to share their experience of loneliness, assuming that everyone has had such an encounter. To capture the diversity of experiences and include the most acute cases, we aimed to reach maximum variations with socio-demographic characteristics that increase the risk of loneliness, such as living alone, the level of education, employment status, gender, and health status. Interviewees were recruited with the help of interviewers' social networks, social media, email invitations to different rural and urban communities, associations of disabled people, students, and snowball sampling. In some cases, due to the sensitivity of the topic, prospective interviewees refused to take part in the study. However, it was not untypical for this type of research. The narrative interviews were conducted between December 2020 – March 2021 in Lithuanian language.

Due to the COVID-19 pandemic and quarantine in Lithuania, interviews could only be conducted remotely, using Skype, Zoom, Facebook Messenger, and, in some cases, by telephone. All interviews, except one, were recorded and transcribed. In one case the interviewee refused to be recorded, thus, written notes were made instead. Similarly to other research (Gray et al. 2020; Khan – MacEachen 2022; Korpela et al. 2023), we did not observe major shortcomings that would be related to remote way of interviewing and we

support the view that it is a secure, accessible, and cost-effective means of data collection.

Research ethics

The study was conducted in line with the fundamental ethical principles of anonymity, privacy, and confidentiality. However, because there was no ethics committee at the research institute at the time of the study, no formal ethical approval was obtained. Before participating in the study, all respondents gave their informed consent after receiving detailed information about the study. They were assured that their information would be kept confidential and anonymous and that they had the right not to answer questions and/or quit the interview at any time.

The interviewers had contacts of psychological services in case they would guess that an informant would benefit from it. After first interviews all interviewers were discussing their experiences, challenges faced and possible best solutions. In order to mitigate security concerns that arise with digital data collection we followed the best practices outlined in the guidance for researchers in that area (Lobe et al. 2020).

The sample

In total, 45 narrative interviews were conducted. Young (18–29-year-old) and middle-aged (30–44, 45–59-year-old; 15 people in each group) adults participated in the study. Research has revealed a U-shape loneliness prevalence during life course with higher scores among young and old people (Yang – Victor 2011). Loneliness in old age is quite well researched, it is related to multiple losses of close people (partner, siblings, school friends, etc.), shrinking social network and living alone. The skills and ability to cope with loneliness in old age is cumulated through the life course. But the scientific knowledge about loneliness in old age cannot be directly generalized to younger age groups (Shah – Househ 2023). The life phases of younger and older people are substantially different. While old age is often characterized by an increasing number of losses in health and social functioning, in younger age gains are more prevalent than losses (Baltes 1997). Also the impact of factors on loneliness may differ during the life course, for example, losing the spouse at young age may have a much stronger impact on loneliness than in old age, when the death of the spouse is more common. In addition, mechanisms that link factors with loneliness may be different for younger and older people, because of the reduced energy or changed motivations that older people have to invest in new relationships (Huxhold – Fiori 2024). Findings for older people are therefore not necessarily applicable to younger age groups, and vice versa. So, our aim was to explore broader variations of loneliness before the life stage it becomes

especially acute. Beside that, a recent study from Lithuania revealed that (older) age was not a predictor of loneliness (Rapolienė – Tretjakova 2021). Regarding other characteristics of the sample, 27 participants were women. The highest level of education was secondary for nine participants and university for 35 of the informants, and one had vocational education. Most of the informants (33) were from cities, others from small towns (6) and rural areas (6). Some informants (3) had disabilities, were unemployed (4), and belonged to national minorities (2). Informants living alone (18) made 40 per cent of the sample (Table 2).

Table 2: **Sociodemographic characteristics of the study sample (N=45)**

Characteristics	N
Gender	
Women	27
Men	18
Age	
18-29	15
30-44	15
45-59	15
Education	
Primary	-
Secondary	9
Professional	1
University	35
Employment status	
Student	3
Working	38
Unemployed	4
Health	
Without disabilities	42
With disabilities	3
Ethnic composition	
Lithuanian	43
Pole	1
Jew	1
Place of residence	
City	33
Mid-sized town	6
Rural area	6
Household composition	
Living alone	18
Renting flat with others	5
With partner	2
With spouse (incl. children)	9
With parents (incl. own children)	9
With adult children	2

Procedure

Narrative interviews were carried out by four experienced interviewers and took on average 1 hour and 5 minutes (the range between 24 min. and 2 hours 47 min.). Interviews started with a general question about the way and circumstances informants experience loneliness. They also were asked complementary questions about the moments of loneliness, stages in life when loneliness was most acute, related feelings, about loneliness due to deaths of close relatives, experiences of solitude, etc. Following the aim of this study, we analysed only data related to the subjective meanings of loneliness as an unpleasant experience, because it is topic of most loneliness studies and the target of social policy measures (solitude as a desired experience of being alone deserves a separate analysis). For this article, the most important material was collected by the questions: *How do you understand the words "loneliness" and "solitude"? What does loneliness mean personally for you?* We also asked the study participants to evaluate the intensity of their current experience of loneliness on a 10-point scale. In several cases there was a mismatch between the verbal expression of experience and its evaluation in numbers, as participants which we would consider being severe lonely, would estimate their loneliness as medium or minor and vice versa. For example, a young lady with a disability, who has no single person with whom she would have a good connection, neither relatives nor friends, described various experiences of loneliness throughout the interview. She paused at one point due to difficulty of discussing such experiences but ultimately rated her loneliness as 5 from 10. This relatively average evaluation appears to understate the depth of her emotional struggle, potentially reflecting a coping mechanism, a reluctance to fully acknowledge her feelings, or a different internal scale for measuring loneliness. Others underscored differences of loneliness intensity depending on social situations. For instance, a middle-aged man found difficult to rate his loneliness as very high (9-10), explaining that he „*is not losing his mind*" (27MII[6]). However, during Christmas, he would rate his loneliness as 10, and during COVID pandemic restrictions, as 5. The interviews were emotionally difficult for the interviewers, because the participants were openly disclosing their suffering and it was not possible to disassociate or not feel empathetic towards them. After the first interviews we built a self-support group and discussed the challenges faced during the interviews. Some interviews turned out to be semi-therapeutical, and several informants were thankful for being listened and responded in a releasing way.

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[6] All study participants were given codes consisting of numerals (1–45) referring to the number of the interview, letters (W = women, M = men), and the age group of the informant: I —18–29 y. o., II — 30–44 y. o., III — 45–59 y. o.

Thematic analysis

All interviews were read several times and coded inductively by three researchers with the help of the MAXQDA 2020 software so that each interview was coded into small units of meaning by one researcher and afterwards checked by another. After the initial coding, the main themes were identified, and the excerpts were selected based on their relevance for the analysis of the subjective meanings of loneliness. Unfortunately, initial coding, including social and emotional aspects of loneliness, resulted in significant overlaps, so this step had to be repeated, trying to avoid theoretical assumptions and relying mainly on the open coding. This stage was carried out by two researchers in close cooperation. Next, codes were grouped into larger themes by grouping and regrouping codes to represent larger units of meaning (Miles et al. 2014). Several major themes were identified. Excerpts of the interviews used in the initial draft of the article were translated into English (and translations mutually corrected) by the three researchers from Lithuania, in order for the foreign colleague to have a broader view of the data (many of the excerpts were taken out in later stages). Before submission, the translation of remaining excerpts was corrected by a professional interpreter.

Subjective meanings of loneliness: empirical evidence

We will discuss the common features of loneliness, followed by an exploration of the categories of meanings derived from inductive coding in the subsequent sections. First of all, the study participants stressed the subjective and coercive nature of loneliness. They defined it as an unwanted internal, psychological, and spiritual condition that is relative and *"not necessarily the* [objective] *truth"* (29WI). The affective nature of loneliness is emphasised by our participants, suggesting that loneliness is perceived as a deeply ingrained human experience, beyond momentary feelings, tied to a broader sense of belonging and connection.

> "First of all, I associate the term loneliness with sadness, not being understood <...> It's like being alone, but not physically, rather on the level of feelings and fundamentally <...> Solitude is more or less about the physical world, while loneliness is about the emotional world" (36MI).

The individual contrasts loneliness with solitude, suggesting that solitude is tied to physical isolation, whereas loneliness is rooted in emotional and existential dimensions. Loneliness might be experienced as emptiness, i.e., either lacking meaning or activities in one's life or after intensive periods of giving self to others. It is closely intertwined with other negative feelings like sadness, anxiety, fear, hopelessness, uselessness, disbelief, despair, depression, guilt,

shame, and pain. The concomitant negative feelings might impede social contacts and contribute to keeping distance and isolation.

> "You feel alone in your inner world, alone on this earth for some reason, maybe because of that guilt or shame" (29WI).

Thus, loneliness is experienced as a subjective condition of coercive nature, often as emptiness, and inextricably accompanied by a variety of other difficult feelings. It is worth noting that in the collected data, loneliness emerged as a feeling, an emotional condition, i.e., the data does not support the view that emotional loneliness could be a distinct type.

While analysing lay meanings of loneliness, the study material provides a broad spectrum of concepts: loneliness as a given phenomenon (something that has been given together with human life), as the lack of connection with oneself, as tensions between an individual and society and between authenticity and sociability. Other aspects of the concept refer to the disrupted relationships between an individual and others, including the absence of physical contact, the lack of connection with others and the lack of different kinds of support.

The (a) given

Loneliness as something given in life is described through the individual uniqueness, longing for God or serenity. At the very core, loneliness is experienced as an inherent part of the human condition, a part of life itself ("*you come into the world alone and you leave the world alone",* 16WII), an inevitable experience of life. This type can be attributed to the existential loneliness that cannot be changed by a person neither fully nor partly. Such loneliness is based on the uniqueness of every single individual: it is both a gift and a source of suffering, the ambivalent nature of our existence. As an older study participant said, that is why we remain a secret for each other.

> "Basically, there has not been, will not be, and there is no other human in the world the same as me, and thank God. It is a gift that we are all different. <…> This is why we are interesting to one another. And because of that, there will always be a part of something where I won't be fully understood" (22WIII).

The individual's uniqueness and difference from others also imply the inability to connect with others and internal isolation, an inexplicable feeling of being alone when surrounded by people. Such examples from narratives described loneliness as emotional isolation, but there are some referring to loneliness as cognitive isolation, an inability to connect cognitively with other people, as evident from the extract below:

"this seems so obvious, but I have to explain and justify how I see things, my own perspective. And then you start thinking that people see things completely differently than I do" (5WI).

Such excerpts reveal a significant theme in the meaning of loneliness - the internal tension between valuing one's uniqueness and longing for connection. This substantial loneliness related to uniqueness might be also conceptualised as longing for God, miracle or serenity by other participants depending on the world view.

Lack of connection with oneself

Another layer of loneliness emerges when an existentially lonely individual experiences problems in the relationship with the oneself. The disturbed connection with oneself might manifest as fear or suppression of oneself. Such a person might be unable to recognise their feelings and psychological conditions and fail to "hear one's heart" (30WII).

> "Loneliness is equal to pain, it is equal to tears, and it is equal to not finding yourself, losing yourself. It seems to me that this feeling is, well, you are alone, and you don't know what to do with yourself. Simply alone" (23WI).

The reference to "not finding yourself" or "losing yourself" suggests that loneliness is more than a social or emotional experience—it also impacts one's sense of identity. We may find a connection with existential dimension of loneliness, meaning that being disconnected from others may lead to self-alienation, a feeling of being adrift. Loneliness is portrayed not just as an absence of connection but as a disruption in one's ability to act or engage meaningfully with the world ("you don't know what to do with yourself") or not being able to manage and control oneself.

Some interviews revealed an unwillingness to express vulnerability about loneliness. This could be interpreted as a defence mechanism or a reflection of cultural or personal values that discourage the acknowledgment of emotional struggles.

> "Loneliness for me, maybe I'll say it very categorically here, but it seems to me it's a personal problem. I wouldn't allow myself to complain that I'm lonely, because then that would mean that you're not trying to bring content into your own life, because you can find substance – you can make friends, you can write, you can read, you can pray. So, nothing prevents you from creating that internal substance." (1WIII).

This perspective contrasts with perspectives that frame loneliness as a fundamentally social condition, influenced by external factors such as community, relationships, or societal structure. Rather, the central concept is applied of "internal substance" suggesting that meaningful connections stem from inner resources and loneliness can be mitigated by actively engaging in meaningful activities. A lack of connection with oneself is also revealed as 'not discovering yourself' (8WII), a fear of one's own thoughts, a fear of being alone, and even a fear of living or making the wrong decision.

(Inner) Disbalance between an individual and society

We divided the category of (inner) disbalance between an individual and society into two sub-codes – overwhelmed socialisation and authenticity versus sociability.

Overwhelmed socialisation.
We can conceptualise this dimension through the tension between an individual and society and includes narratives on loneliness emerging due to non-compliance with the identity norms or living mainly according to social pressure. Some participants of the study admitted that the balance between the self and the environment might be broken due to the overwhelming socialisation when people live socially "correct" lives (17WII), fulfil expectations of others or follow standards instead of their own wishes and own dreams.

> "I can describe my loneliness as not finding oneself in oneself, as running away from oneself. Loneliness is summoned by everyone around you, by imposed frameworks and all those traditions" (23WI).

Loss of connection with oneself is being brought again in the context of normative expectations. One might be lost in fulfilling duties related to social norms and not pay attention to own internal life. An individual might also feel lonely because of being different from socially acceptable standards and not fulfilling identity norms, i.e., because of what one is, not what one does, and, consequently, feeling stigmatised. From the individual perspective, this process is rather unclear and vague when some features of own personality, e.g., being "slower" (2WII), *"not quite like others"* (9WI) or contemplative, are anticipated as a cause.

Authenticity versus sociability.
Another way to reveal the tension between an individual and society is authenticity versus sociability. Paradoxically, strengthening the connection with oneself and bringing up one's original authenticity to the social environment

means increased loneliness and, in this case, its social type. On the one hand, being different, not fitting into a group or a broader society might be more or less actively punished by the surrounding people. A young man considered the feelings of being rejected caused by informal social sanctions applied in situations of intolerance and non-acceptance:

> "loneliness <...> could be, I don't know, maybe some kind of circle of friends where maybe you don't fit in. Or let's say your interests do not align, or someone condemns you or perceives you differently. So, you might feel lonely because you are, in a sense, detached from that narrow, say, a community of your friends or a group of people. It is the same on a larger scale, perhaps, people with disabilities or those who deviate from the norms of society in some other way, sometimes they are pushed out" (41MI).

Feeling unaccepted by important people undermines an individual's sense of identity and intensifies feelings of loneliness. On the other hand, fostering a connection to oneself, following and implementing one's wishes and dreams despite expectations of the close social environment also means non-compliance to social norms, kind of social innovation, thus, increased loneliness.

> "The model of a nuclear family — a family, husband, work, career, some accumulated capital — I do not want that, but at the same time, I secretly do because I do not know otherwise. And I try to protest against it and consequently encounter loneliness" (15WI).

Therefore, a disbalance between an individual and society, between the individual's wishes and the social expectations, elevates loneliness. The loneliness narratives in this group negotiate the borders between an individual and society.

Lack of connection with others

In the study sample, three thematic groups on definitions based on the lack of connection with other people can be delineated: the lack of a partner or other contacts (incl. the lack of physical contacts); the lack of or disturbed connection, i.e., feeling lonely among others; loneliness as the lack of support.

Lack of a partner or other contacts.
One of the common notions of loneliness is making a clear parallel between loneliness and singlehood: being lonely for some informants simply means not having a partner. In the following excerpt, the lack of connection implies the absence of partnerships, the informant admits lacking not any kind of connection, but particularly a close partner:

"It is hard, this loneliness. Hard, when there are lots of people whom one can write, call but, really, this one person isn't there" (15WI).

Feeling unneeded is interpreted as the worst life scenario by some of our participants. It is included in the definitions of this kind, and living alone brings a range of severe feelings when nobody is waiting at home.

Other informants emphasise not the lack of a partner but the lack of other social contacts. Along with feelings of being not needed, other accompanying epithets are used, such as not feeling special, not contributing, and not being seen or being regarded *"as the fifth leg of a dog"* (15WI). If some informants notice the lack of balance between being alone and social interactions, for others, the description of loneliness undertakes extreme forms of a painful experience:

"If you haven't spoken to anyone in three days and you can count on the fingers of one hand how many words you uttered during those three days, I think you need to start thinking that you are lonely. I think it is loneliness when you come home, and nobody is waiting for you there some four years in a row" (12WII).

Such extremes of loneliness are closely related to isolation. One exceptional case from our sample is a man's six-year experience in a Russian prison. Physical isolation was regarded as the "real loneliness" and a de-humanising experience.

Disturbed connection: lonely among others. Turbulences of communication.
Another type of definition includes arguments on loneliness as a consequence when social contacts are available, but a connection is missing. In other words, it is expressed as being in the wrong place, with the wrong people or in a dis-harmonious relationship with a close environment.

"Even with millions of friends, a person might feel lonely, unhappy, not having fulfilled their expectations. <…> Maybe they feel not in the right world, not in the right place, maybe not with the right people... Something is a "no" [isn't right]" (8WII).

"Some feeling of despair that there are so many friends, you are surrounded by, so many people, and yet, you're still alone" (15WI).

Most narratives on loneliness described as an experience that occurs when surrounded by people address various turbulences in communication. The lack of connection while being around other people might occur because of mis-matched interests or values; for example, spiritual or altruistic topics are not accepted in conversations with people without altruistic motives.

It might be experienced as different communication expectations, when one feels left behind or being in the wrong place during gatherings of relatives or friends, when other people fail to understand due to cultural differences. However, the most common denominator of narratives is the loss of connection because of cognitive isolation, i.e., when one feels not being understood.

Loneliness among other people is interpreted as a paradox, as a mismatching feeling in certain periods of life when the communication with friends is mostly intensive; however, the contrasting inner world creates a sense of separation:

> "Then, I really felt as lonely as a finger in this world, entirely… And this was the loneliest time despite the fact that most of it I spent with so many people, like never before or after. I was twenty, I used to go to parties with friends and acquittances, I was really surrounded by people much more than I am now, but despite this, I felt the loneliest at that time" (29WI).

Loneliness is also described as an inability to share a secret or an important decision with other people even if there are rational reasons for that, or because of different daily routines when everybody is concerned only about their lives. Some narratives on the lack of quality connections resemble the sociological alienation term when being alone among others is interpreted as a common feature of large cities.

Disturbed connection: lonely among others. The lack of support: "alone on the battlefield".

Loneliness is defined as the lack of emotional support, such as an inability to share feelings with others because of mistrust or anticipated misunderstanding. Situations of feeling unsafe to disclose emotions and share inner feelings are being used as examples to define loneliness in the closest environments. Such kind of loneliness is being interpreted as an extremely painful manifestation:

> "When the closest people see your situation wrong, don't hear you, then you feel so lonely, then you feel lonely in every way. I think it is the most horrible loneliness that can exist when they don't hear or don't see or don't want to see on purpose when you feel bad" (1WIII).

In some narratives, the lack of support from others overcomes the boundaries of emotional support. A common metaphor in this group of narratives is *"alone on a battlefield is not a solder"*. The metaphor expresses the lack of various kinds of support. An older woman shared her experience from the previous marriage when she felt she had nobody to lean on ("*you are not a soldier alone on a battlefield, but you have to be the soldier and solve*

problems", 25WIII). Her narrative reflects an unequal distribution of gender roles in the private sphere. This kind of feeling may also occur in public spheres, such as work if the environment is unsupportive or even hostile.

Table 3: **Summary of loneliness concepts retrieved from interviews**

No	Concept of loneliness	Sub-concept	Expressions	Type of loneliness	From interview No
1.	The given		Uniqueness, longing for God or serenity	Existential	5, 11, 16, 22, 36
2.	Lack of connection with oneself		Fear, suppression of self, unrecognised feelings, disorientation	Individual	1, 7, 8, 14, 23, 30, 44
3.	Inner disbalance between an individual and society	Overwhelmed socialisation	Fulfilling mainly social standards, duties and expectations of others	Individual/social	2, 7, 8, 9, 17, 23
		Strengthened authenticity	Not fitting into a group, non-compliance to social norms, social innovation	Individual/social	15, 41
4.	Lack of/disturbed connection with others	Lack of a partner or other contacts	Alone/isolated, unneeded, unacknowledged	Social (in lit.: emotional)	12, 13, 15, 17, 21, 33, 34, 35, 43
		Lonely among others: troubles of communication	Disharmonious relationship with the close environment, the discrepancy between inner and social world, mismatch of interests, values, keeping secrets, left behind, not understood	Social	2, 4, 7, 8, 11, 13, 14, 15, 19, 21, 22, 29, 37, 41
		Lonely among others: lack of support	Lack of emotional and other support, mistrust	Social	1, 11, 19, 22, 25, 32

Source: composed by the authors

Concepts of loneliness that emerged from the analysis of empirical data are presented in Table 3. They vary from an existential type of loneliness to indi-

vidual, then balancing on the margins of individual and social, and, finally, representing the social dimension. It is important to note that the emotional dimension persists in all types of loneliness, and from the data, it is impossible to separate the feelings that would be typical for one type of loneliness but not the other. Thus, the common division between social and emotional loneliness used in many studies is not evident in the data of this study. However, a disturbed (hindered) relationship between an individual and society emerges in all types of loneliness except for existential loneliness and, to a lesser extent, the trouble connecting to oneself as a red line. Loneliness is related to disbalances in socialisation and internalisation of social norms. It emerges in social situations when communication between an individual and their environment is disturbed or dissatisfying. This finding resonates with the view that "one needs to feel connected to significant others to not feel lonely", and the significant others may be from an intimate, closer relational or broader collective sphere, with the latter of which people identify themselves (Cacioppo et al. 2015). On the level of interpersonal relationships, it resonates with the notion of failed intersubjectivity proposed by Wood (1986).

Considering study participants whose experience build each of the type and sub-type of loneliness, representatives of all three age groups and both genders are found in the first and last type of loneliness ("The given" and "Lack of/disturbed connection with others"), but the oldest group is not found in the second and third type of loneliness ("Lack of connection with oneself" and "Inner disbalance between an individual and society"). In the qualitative study we cannot make generalizations on the base of socio-demographic characteristics, but the data gives a hint that the socialization related issues causing loneliness due to lack of connection with oneself and disbalance between individual and society seem to be more acute for younger people. In later stages of life people might have solved these issues or applying coping strategies.

Are the identified dimensions of loneliness interrelated? We can assume that lack of connection to oneself leads to disbalance with the environment. The overlapping of these dimensions of loneliness in the interviews No 7, 8, 23 and also experienced diffuculties of communication described in the interviews No 7 and 8 can partly support this assumption. Interviews No 11 and 22 reveal an overlap between existential and social dimensions, such as difficulties in communication and lack of support. However, the overall overlap accross the dimensions appears very limited, with different sets and variations of loneliness types and varying intensities of specific types in individual cases.

To sum up empirical analysis, we can conceptualise loneliness as a multidimensional phenomenon, encompassing emotional, existential, and relational aspects. It is a coercive and subjective experience, accompanied by difficult

emotions such as sadness, anxiety, guilt, and despair. Participants often contrast loneliness with solitude, emphasizing that loneliness involves emotional and existential disconnection (with others, oneself or systems providing meaning) or disbalance between oneself and environment rather than merely physical isolation. It is further linked to feelings of emptiness and a loss of purpose, often impeding meaningful social interactions.

Discussion

The questions we aimed to answer in the study were: what are subjective meanings of loneliness, and do prevailing academic approaches fit with the way lay people narrate loneliness? In other words, we tried to answer if aspects of loneliness captured by the qualitative approach would allow broadening or reconceptualising the common definitions. The described research should exemplify the variety of meanings people render the word "loneliness" and also allow revealing the common denominator between these definitions that would lead to a general definition of loneliness.

As the empirical data analysis revealed, an answer to the question "(how often) do you feel lonely?" might cover several concepts of loneliness and various combinations in different proportions of these. The collected data proved the complexity of the loneliness phenomenon and suggested that certain aspects were not yet grasped by the most popular classical definition (a negative experience that occurs in a discrepancy between desired and actual levels of social contact; Perlman – Peplau 1982). This definition excludes the existential dimension which was acknowledged by the previous studies (e.g., Dahlberg 2007; Larsson et al. 2019; Mayers et al. 2002; Van Tilburg 2021), a broader understanding of socially experienced loneliness (as non-compliance with social norms, loneliness experienced around people) and certain individual aspects of loneliness, such as the lack of connection with oneself, revealed by this study.

The lay concepts of loneliness extracted from the data (Table 2) can be seen as illustrations of the definitions or theoretical approaches mentioned in the introduction partly supporting each of them. The first two ("The given" and the "Lack of connection with oneself") support the view of Moustakas (1961): the first refers to the existential loneliness, the second refers to loneliness anxiety, as named by Moustakas, and both can be attributed to the psychological dimension of loneliness. The third concept ("Inner disbalance between individual and society") could be attributed to the phenomenological approach, the disbalance between the inner self and its social manifestations (Rogers 1961), and it would fit the socio-psychological dimension. The sub-concept ("Lack of a partner or

other contacts") of the fourth concept ("Lack of/disturbed connection with others") refers to social (and emotional) isolation. The two last sub-concepts, describing troubles of communication with people and the lack of various types of support, were little mentioned in previous research. They resonate with the notion of loneliness by Cacioppo et al. (2011) as perceived social isolation, including social pain, which signals the weakening connections to others and motivates their repair and maintenance. The last concept ("Lack of/disturbed connection with others") could be attributed to the socio-communicational and cultural dimension.

These four concepts of loneliness can be seen as its aspects, varying in importance in individual cases. If considered as an entity, all together experienced by individuals as loneliness, they would fit the definition provided by Stein and Tuval-Mashiach (2015) for cases when the term "loneliness" does not even appear in narratives. Their definition of loneliness consists of seven elements: (a) a sense of isolation (subjective or objective, metaphysical, communicative, existential, social or other), (b) a relationship (as isolation can be understood only in the relational context, i.e., the isolation from someone or something), (c) an experiencing self, (d) a representation of an Other, (e) a deficiency of relational need(s), (f) a sense of discrepancy (between the desired fulfilment of the needs and the current state), and (g) the psychological pain or aversion. All these elements are also evident in the conceptualisation of loneliness emerging from the data of this study.

It is important to note that loneliness is usually seen as a subjective feeling and implies such necessary elements as a relationship and representation of an Other, i.e., the social dimension. How does society contribute to the creation of loneliness? As noted by anthropologists (Fajans 2006), emotions are created socially: they might be expressed depending on a social context (a funeral or a wedding) and regardless of the internal feelings of participating individuals. The data of this study provided examples of loneliness experienced as such mismatch between individual feelings and the social context.

Returning to the perspective of current dominant definitions of loneliness, the cognitive approach, linking it to the discrepancy between the desired and actual levels of social contact, might be latent in the experiences without the awareness of the individuals. Thus, it is doubtful if such a link is the main feature of loneliness experienced by people. The division between social and emotional loneliness proposed by interactionists is not supported by the data of this study, either, as all types of loneliness carry an emotional load, sometimes complemented by (awareness of) another dimension, i.e., cognitive isolation (not being understood).

Limitations

Our research has several limitations concerning the sample and the focus on a single context and time period. 1) The study focused on young and middle-aged adults (18-59), future research could explore the impact of age and generational differences on lay conceptualizations of loneliness; 2) The necessity to employ remote interview techniques due the pandemic implied that persons without access to them could not be included. However, we did not rely exclusively on videoconferencing platforms, but also conducted interviews through phone; 3) Even though we aimed to ensure the variability of participants in terms of the demographic characteristics, the sample is still skewed towards better educated people, who are living in big cities. Differences in social economic status and gender might reveal further variations in experiences of loneliness; 4) The study is carried out in one linguistic-socio-cultural environment. To provide a more comprehensive understanding of subjective meanings of loneliness, it is essential to expand the research to different environments and cultural settings; 5) Furthermore, our research was focused on a single point in time. Given that loneliness can be a dynamic experience that changes over time, there is a compelling case for conducting longitudinal studies which can shed light on how the various dimensions of loneliness evolve and interact.

Conclusion

Lay perspectives are important for testing the validity of theoretical models and measures, if they are to have any relevance to the population they are applied to (Bowling – Dieppe 2005; Bowling – Gabriel 2007). As findings of our study suggest, there are significant mismatches between the theoretical conceptualizations of loneliness prevalent in research and lay experiences, which call for a review of the conceptualization and its measurements. We suggest that in defining loneliness the emphasis could be set on the lack of connection, including its existential, psychological and social dimensions; for example, as an unpleasant feeling of disturbed connection with the universe, oneself, surrounding people and/or the broader society, including internalised social/cultural norms. Consequently, questions measuring loneliness could be formulated as "Do you feel connected to the universe/god, yourself, your partner/spouse, family, friends and others, close/local environment, broader circles like special interest or professional groups, broader society as people in general or in a particular country, etc.". According to Batsleer and Duggan (2021), the prominent definitions of loneliness (de Jong-Gierveld 1987; Peplau – Perlman

1982) are based on the individualisation of loneliness. Our proposed definition expands the individualistic approach, including the existential dimension and tension between society and an individual. This broader concept could be used in further development of loneliness scales and further research to more precisely inform social policy and adjust practical interventions.

Declaration of Conflicting Interest
The Authors declare that there is no conflict of interest.

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